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SUBJECT: ALGERIA: JULY - SEPTEMBER SECURITY TRENDS SUMMARY

ALGIERS 00001009 001.2 OF 003

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: This cable is the first of a series of quarterly summaries of security trends in Algeria related to terrorism, social unrest and criminal activity. This report refers to trends observed during the period July - September 2009. The information draws on reporting from local press, embassy staff and embassy contacts. AQIM continued to pose a significant security threat in Algeria. The frequency and pattern of attacks were consistent with those observed in the first six months of 2009. Security experts observed that government counterterrorism operations restrained AQIM's capacity to conduct high-profile attacks. Nevertheless, AQIM carried out lethal operations against government and civilian targets, including one attack that killed 23 gendarmes. There have been no suicide attacks since last March. There were 34 reported incidents of civil unrest, mostly spontaneous civilian protests over declining living conditions, some of which resulted in injuries to both law enforcement personnel and civilians. Meanwhile, police contacts reported 6,600 kilograms of illicit drug seizures and 870 drug-related arrests. The National Gendarmerie made 742 arrests related to small arms and ammunition smuggling. END SUMMARY.

TERRORISM TRENDS: JULY - SEPTEMBER

2. (SBU) Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) remained a significant threat to government security forces and civilian populations, particularly in regions east of Algiers. The frequency and pattern of terrorist incidents between July and September were consistent with levels of the first six months of 2009, i.e., concentrated mostly in the Kabylie region. AQIM primarily targeted government security forces using ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). There were 69 bombings, 20 kidnappings and six fake roadblocks between July and September, according to local press reports. During this period 169 terrorists were reportedly killed and 13 wounded. Security force casualties totaled 60 deaths and 69 injured. There were 27 civilian deaths and 17 injuries. Security forces arrested 151 individuals on charges of terrorism or belonging to a terrorist support network; 51 terrorists surrendered. In public statements, Algerian officials estimated the number of active terrorists in northern Algeria at between 350 and 400 individuals.

3. (SBU) Government forces generally limited AQIM's area of operations in northern Algeria to the regions of Ain Defla, Djelfa, Boumerdes, Dellys, Tizi Ouzou, Bouira, Bordj Bou Arreridj, Biskra, Tebessa and Tiaret. Experts consider

Boumerdes and Dellys to be the most active regions of AQIM activity. In July and August, the Algerian military launched air strikes against targets in both areas.

MORE ISOLATED, BUT STILL DEADLY

14. (SBU) Terrorist attacks in Algeria tend to increase in August and in the weeks leading up to Ramadan. In August of last year, AQIM launched a series of lethal suicide attacks against police and gendarmerie recruitment facilities, killing 46 and injuring at least 65. Later in the month, a car bomb outside of a hotel in Bouira killed another 11 civilians. In August of this year, AQIM operations failed to produce the same level of visibility and lethality. Security experts noted that AQIM had not carried out a suicide bombing since the March 9 suicide attack against a communal guard post in Tadmait outside Tizi Ouzou. During July - September, AQIM's most deadly attack was the July 29 ambush of a National Gendarmerie supply convoy near Damous (Tipaza province), located 150 kilometers west of Algiers. According to press reports, AQIM insurgents killed 23 gendarme officers and seized weapons and uniforms. The incident was identical to a June 17 AQIM attack on a gendarme escort guarding a group of 40 Chinese workers near Bordj Bou Arreridj. On August 4, terrorists detonated a vehicle borne IED in front of a police station in Tizi Ouzou that injured 25 individuals, including four police officers.

15. (SBU) Local press and security experts attributed the decrease in high-profile AQIM attacks to a summer of successful counterterrorism operations and the dismantling of support and recruitment networks. Embassy notes that this year's Ramadan period, like last year's, remained relatively

ALGIERS 00001009 002.2 OF 003

free of terrorist attacks, despite AQIM threats to sow chaos. Cherif Ouazani, a security correspondent who writes for the French language weekly magazine Jeune Afrique, wrote on August 30 that AQIM lost up to 20 percent (i.e., 100 according to Ouazani's estimate) of its combatants in clashes with the Algerian army in July and August. Other press reporting stated that government pressure on supply and recruitment efforts forced AQIM to revert to traditional GSPC/GIA tactics, i.e., ambushes and roadside bombings. In September, authorities arrested ten individuals in Boumerdes suspected of belonging to a support network for terrorist cells in Si Mustapha, Zemmouri and Baghlia, often called "the triangle of death." An Embassy contact with ties to the security establishment told us in October that AQIM's geographic isolation - having been bottled up under pressure from security forces - hindered communication and coordination among AQIM leadership, weakening AQIM's overall operational effectiveness. However, he warned that isolated AQIM cells could still carry out attacks independently and, therefore, posed a significant threat.

16. (SBU) There was evidence of AQIM planning against targets in Algiers. A police ordinance disposal team diffused a device found near a police station at the Algiers bus terminal on August 29 that contained two pounds of TNT and a cell phone wired as a remote detonator. In July, police in Algiers detected a group linked to AQIM that was planning to conduct pre-operational surveillance against the Embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom and Denmark.

CIVIL UNREST

17. (SBU) Embassy notes continuing incidents of public protest over a variety of social and economic issues. Spontaneous riots and other forms of protest over declining living conditions occurred frequently outside the capital in the eastern Kabylie region (although less intense incidents elsewhere in the country underscored that Kabylie was not the only region in Algeria experiencing such troubles). Local

press accounts identified 34 incidents of civil unrest between July and September. In late July, Kabylie residents in Tadmait (near Tizi Ouzou) blocked a major highway with burning tires to protest the government's response to spreading forest fires in the region. Several days later, the same residents took to the streets to protest a terrorist attack that resulted in the death of four young people. A series of small-scale riots throughout the Kabylie region and eastern Algeria occurred in late August. Residents expressed their anxiety over deteriorating security conditions, unemployment, and a lack of basic public services, such as water, electricity and health care. On August 4, a riot erupted near the town of el-Tarf near the Tunisian border after a young woman died during a construction operation conducted by a Japanese firm. Angry residents barricaded a nearby road, set fire to the company's equipment and ransacked public buildings in town.

18. (SBU) Disputes over provision of public housing also sparked protests throughout Algeria. Hundreds of poor families in the village of Sidi Ali Benyoub near Sidi Bel Abbes protested the July 28 publication of a list of public housing beneficiaries, which, they claimed, allocated 58 public housing units to families that did not qualify for assistance. On August 31, residents in Medea (50 kilometers south of Algiers) rioted over housing allocations and injured two police officers. In September, Algeria's leading French-language daily El Watan argued that Algerians have lost confidence in government institutions and are increasingly inclined to seek their own justice, resulting in family and clan disputes that often turn violent. In Algerian cities during Ramadan, altercations between rival suburbs were common, especially among youth, which El Watan called a new social trend. In one incident, an argument at a family gathering sparked a fight that left one man dead, 19 injured and resulted in 15 arrests.

CRIME AND ARMS/HUMAN SMUGGLING

19. (SBU) Local press reported September 15 that, since February 2009, the National Gendarmerie (NG) arrested 742 persons and placed 351 people in custody for smuggling

ALGIERS 00001009 003.2 OF 003

weapons and ammunition. Weapons smuggling activities were most frequent in Algeria's eastern provinces, including Batna, Msila, Oued Souf and Amenas. Gendarmerie officials said most weapons are of eastern European origin and are smuggled to Algeria via Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Libya. NG officials also inventoried weapons issued during the 1990s to members of citizen militias, called legitimate defense groups, to prevent those weapons from entering the black market. According to RSO contacts, authorities seized 222 cases of ammunition and made 272 arrests between July and September.

10. (SBU) This quarter witnessed an increase in the number of cases of human smuggling associated with illegal migration, according to police. RSO contacts said authorities opened 72 illegal migration cases and made 308 arrests. Many illegal migrants are sub-Saharan Africans seeking economic opportunities in Europe. Algerian migrants, referred to locally as "harraga," have also increased and with them the number of illegal networks of smugglers promising to deliver potential migrants to Europe in boats departing the Algerian coast.

PEARCE